

Boys on a lumber pile in lumberyard, ca 1910, MHS Photo



“Outside the sawmill was an immense lumber yard. Some of the lumber piles were very high, as high as a two-story house. Within the lumberyard men would pile the boards into orderly lumber piles. The piles were in double rows with long alleys between each two double rows.

We watched men building one pile. Already it had been built quite high, but it had not been finished. A man at the top of the pile took each board as it was raised and laid it upon the pile.

We had seen the lumber mill and the lumber yard and we came away.” July 1917, C.W. Jerome.



Mississippi National River
and Recreation Area

Brochure originally developed by the Minneapolis
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and later adapted by the National Park Service. For
more information visit www.minneapolis-parks.org or
www.nps.gov/miss.



A Visit to a Minneapolis Sawmill

On most Saturdays Charles Jerome would take his children, Ida and Bourne, on a family version of a field trip. They visited many places in Minneapolis; flour mills, foundries, historic sites, grain elevators, and more. Afterwards Mr. Jerome would write in a journal describing the visit from the children's point of view. The information in this booklet comes from Mr. Jerome's journals.

C. A. Smith Sawmill, ca. 1905, MHS Photo



July, 1917

Ida and Bourne were 7 and 8 years old. Today when Papa came home from work they were going to take the streetcar and visit a sawmill. Ida had always wanted to see a sawmill. She was very excited! While riding in the streetcar, Papa explained why there were so many sawmills in Minneapolis.

A sawmill is a place where logs (trees that have been cut down) are cut into wood pieces called lumber.

Papa explains about the old lumber days of Minneapolis

“Minneapolis began as a lumber village and city. For miles and miles above St. Anthony Falls our great river was filled all summer long with floating logs awaiting their turn to be cut into lumber. Years and years ago, there were thirteen sawmills in Minneapolis. All day and all night, from the time the ice went out of the river in early spring until late autumn, these mills were all at work. They were sawing pine logs into beams and boards and shingles.”



“These logs were of course the trunks of pine trees. The pines were cut, every winter, in the vast pine forests far north of Minneapolis. The logs were hauled to the brink of the rivers that flow into the Mississippi north of our city. And when the ice of the rivers melted in the springtime, the logs were rolled over into the stream. So they floated down with the current until at length they reached the saw mills of Minneapolis. There seemed to be no end of the logs.”

What do you think we saw next?

“The boards that had been cut by the gang saw were now cut by another saw called a circular saw. Papa pointed out to us a man sitting behind a row of levers. The man would pull towards him one lever or another or perhaps two levers at a time. Whenever he pulled a lever a circular saw would rise halfway through a slot in the floor, cut a board to a particular length, and then dropped down through the slot in the floor.

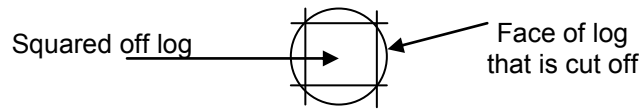
In this way all the boards were cut to the lengths intended by the men at the levers. Each lever man decided in a second what was to be the length of each board as the board was approaching his saws.”



Saw Mill interior, ca 1915, MHS Photo

Ida and Bourne- Visit inside the Sawmill

“Inside the sawmill we heard the shrill z.z.z.zoon of the band saw cutting off a face of the log. It was very interesting to see the logs cut into squares.”



“We watched them for a long time at their rapid, hard work. Then we walked along to where we could see the gang saw at work. From the band saw the squared and partly squared logs are carried on moving chains to a broad gang saw.



The gang saw is not far from the center of the mill; and it takes the logs from both band saws. But what is a gang saw?

I will tell you. It is a number of saws set upright in a frame. In this gang saw there were perhaps thirty of these saws. They were about six feet long. They all moved together rapidly up and down. Thus they cut the logs into boards.

They were cutting two to four logs at a time. How many logs they can cut at once depends upon how big are the logs. As soon as the gang saw had cut through one set of logs it began on another set, then another, then another.”

“Now the days of the Minneapolis saw mills are nearly over. There are only two mills still sawing logs in Minneapolis- two left of the thirteen mills that used to be busy all the time.

Father said he had read in the newspaper that after the end of the next season there would never again be another log sawed in a lumber mill in Minneapolis. Nearly all of the pine forests have been cut away that were near enough to the Mississippi River so that logs may be floated down the river. “



West bank of Mississippi River, Minneapolis, ca 1890, MHS Photo

Ida and Bourne- Visit the outside of a Sawmill

“As soon as we were off the street car we smelled the fragrance of the freshly sawed pine lumber. As we came a little nearer to the big mill we could hear the everlasting roar and buzz of the lumber cutting.

At first we did not go into the mill but walked past it and down to the bank of the river, and a little ways out over the water upon a narrow walk. We wanted to see how the logs are brought from the river into the mill. And here was where that was being done.

The freely floating logs were held from getting away by a chain of logs. Such a chain of logs is called a boom. This boom ended at the saw mill. The booms, Papa told us, used to extend up the river for many miles and formed divisions in the river.”



McMullen Sawmill, Minneapolis, 1894, MHS photo

C. A. Smith Sawmill, Minneapolis, ca 1885, Stereoscope,
Underwood and Underwood photographers, MHS Photo



“Next we saw two men hard at work each with a boat hook. They were pulling the logs about in the stream in order to direct the end of each log into a sort of broad trough. This trough reached from below the level of the river clear up into the second story of the mill. The chain had a sort of teeth that would catch the logs and pull them from the river into the mill.

This was an interesting sight, the men directing the logs and the logs gliding up the long trough. And we stood and watched for some time. At last we left this place and went within the mill.”